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ABSTRACT

The composition classroom has traditionally been seen as one of the most important places to develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Composition theory based on developing students' rhetorical skills in argument seeks, in particular, to address development of these skills. Rhetoric is audience-based and culminates in an argument that should persuade those whom the writer needs to persuade. In classical times, another art preceded rhetoric, the art of dialectic. For Plato, dialogues had an important purpose, i.e., to search for truth, and were done in preparation for producing arguments. In short, dialectic searched for truth, and rhetoric offered truth for public consumption. It is for this reason that dialectic helps students prepare for argumentation. Following the submission and approval of topics, an instructor discusses three methods of argument: dialectic, inductive, and Rogerian. The dialectic appears in script format. The inductive is form-governed and concerned only with an argument's major points. The Rogerian asks students to look at the common ground in both sides of the argument and to offer a proposed resolution. (Contains samples of all three argumentative methods.) (TB)

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1996 CCCC

Dialectic: Rhetoric's Neglected Step-sister Comes of Age

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Step into a composition classroom at any college or university in the United States and you may find any number of activities going on. Our field of study is enriched by many educational theories that have produced a plethora of pedagogical stances and methods. Whether your method of teaching composition is more expressive, more formal, more mimetic, or more rhetorical in design, research and practice in the classroom has, I am certain, given you confidence in your methods and in their efficacy in helping students become better writers.

But I am here today because I believe that we are facing a crisis in critical thinking ability in our classrooms and in our country as a whole. As you look out at the eager (well, somewhat eager) faces of the students who will comprise your next class, any number of them may firmly believe any of the following:

- *World leaders have conspired to create a new world order, in which the world will be divided into nine regions, all of which will be controlled by a central government modeled after the United Nations.
- *AIDS was created through a conspiracy of U.S. government officials whose purpose was to eliminate minority groups from the United States.
- *The Second Amendment to the U.S. Constitution guarantees all American citizens the right to amass arsenals of any type of weapon imaginable.

When questioned about these remarkable beliefs, your students may be unable to ascertain any underlying assumptions they may have, to remember or produce the sources of the information upon which they base their beliefs, or to imagine any method they could use to verify these sources. In short, many of your students may come to your

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composition classes with weak critical thinking and problem-solving skills that endanger their potential development as individuals, as workers, and as members of society.

The composition classroom has traditionally been seen as one of the most important places to develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Composition theory based on developing students' rhetorical skills in argument in particular seeks to address development of these skills. But I believe that any teacher who sets out to instruct his or her students in argument with the thought that, following the standard preparation for argument found in most textbooks, these students will produce effective essays, is doomed to failure. Developing argumentative skill is a process, just as writing is a process. Including one essay, "the argument essay," which usually appears within a writing course in a sequence with other essays such as "the narrative essay" or "the process essay," is not, I believe, an effective way to teach argumentation.

Theresa Enos reminds us that "for hundreds of years rhetoric, the oldest of the humanities, was the center and ultimate goal of all education." But rhetoric is audience-based, and culminates in an argument which will persuade those whom the writer needs to persuade on any given matter. In classical times, another art preceded rhetoric, the art of dialectic, which we may all be most familiar with through the dialogues of Plato. For Plato, these dialogues had an important purpose--the search for truth--and were done preparatory to producing arguments. Dialectic grasped the truth, and rhetoric offered it for public consumption. Learning rhetoric without learning dialectic was much like attempting to run before learning to walk. And I believe it is our current practice of neglecting the dialectic process and treating it like some disdained step-sister of rhetoric that causes problems in the arguments our students produce.

It is for this reason that I have included study in dialectic as a major part of the argument section of any freshman or research composition course which I teach. After some preliminary discussion concerning the nature of argument, argumentative topics, etc., I have each student pick a topic which meets the course standards for being

argumentative (that is, it is a topic upon which reasonable people can and will disagree). Students are instructed to choose topics which appeal to them, since they will be writing three papers on the topics they have chosen.

Following class discussion on possible topics and small group discussion on students' tentative topics and the major arguments included in those topics, students submit tentative paper proposals stating the propositions they have taken on topics they have chosen and the major areas of argument which they see in those topics. In accepting these proposals, I look for topics which contain enough depth and enough arguments both in favor of and against their propositions to give students enough to write on. Once all students are comfortable with their approved topics, we begin discussing three methods of argument, dialectic, inductive, and Rogerian, which will form the basis of the three papers they will be writing. I illustrate the three methods of argument, using models of each type.

The papers will differ in form and, to a certain extent, in content. The dialectic will appear in script format, and will be as inclusive as possible; that is, all arguments relevant to their topics need to be addressed. The inductive paper is very form-governed (and is the only paper so concerned with form which I assign during the whole semester), and will concentrate only on the major arguments within the topics. The Rogerian paper will include the major arguments, along with a statement about common ground in both positions as well as a proposed resolution. In addition, the Rogerian paper is the first one in which outside research is permitted. Copies of the three assignments follow.

Dialectic

In class, we have studied the dialectic form, as represented by Plato's "Duty of a Citizen." For your next assignment, I would like you to write your own dialectic, using as your topic the same topic you will be using for your inductive and midterm (Rogerian) papers. In choosing a topic, it is very important that you choose something that will engage your interest over the next few weeks.

Your pre-writing should be extensive for this essay--at least a Pro/Con grid that adequately presents arguments on both sides of the issue. Although your dialectic will lead to a point, that is, your view on the issue, it must also be a valid exercise in carefully examining both sides of the argumentative topic you have chosen--do not be surprised if your own beliefs are called into question while writing this essay. If that happens, then you are beginning to truly understand the nature of argument.

You will also, in your pre-writing, wish to establish the personalities of the two characters you will choose for your dialectic--their names, ages, motivations, backgrounds. You may not be using this information in your essay itself, but this exercise will help you to form dialogue for these characters that rings true.

For the dialectic, you will need to first establish the setting in a short paragraph. After this introductory paragraph, switch to script format, as in the Plato dialectic. One of your characters should introduce the topic, and, if your pre-writing is well done, the paper should really take off from this point. Do not make your dialectic too one-sided--that is, not all of the good arguments should represent one side of the issue. The character who represents your viewpoint should not appear to be engaged in a battle of wits with an unarmed opponent.

Selection of topic is very important here. You need something definitely argumentative, with enough depth to give you plenty of supporting arguments to work with. Also, you should be interested enough in the topic to want to write about it three times--once as a dialectic, once as an inductive argument, and once as a Rogerian argument.

Inductive Argument

Using the argumentative topic you developed in your dialectic paper, write an essay in which you argue in favor of or against the proposition which was the basis of the dialectic. Your essay should define any key terms or issues comprising the question, and must present your reasons for the position you have taken. In addition, your essay must present and rebut at least one argument from the opposition.

Use your dialectic paper as pre-writing for this assignment. You will probably not use all of the arguments on either side presented in your dialectic, since that was a more comprehensive look at the topic. Carefully select three of your major points, making sure to select points that you can support with fully developed paragraphs, and use those in your inductive argument. Do not forget your rebuttal, placed either in a separate paragraph toward the end of your essay or integrated into your argumentative paragraphs. An inductive argument without rebuttal is incomplete.

Your essay must conform to the 5-paragraph essay format discussed in class. I will be looking for five well-developed paragraphs, and for a developed thesis sentence, following this format:

Par. 1: Introduction, thesis sentence
Par. 2: Presentation of argument point #1
Par. 3: Presentation of argument point #2
Par. 4: Presentation of argument point #3
(anticipation of opposition and rebuttal may appear in any or all of the three presentation of argument point paragraphs, or in the introduction or conclusion)
Par. 5: Conclusion

Your paper will be graded on the strength and development of your argument, as well as on all the writing skills we have worked with so far. Pay special attention to transitions.

Midterm assignment—English 250

Your midterm assignment is a Rogerian argument based on the same topic on which you wrote your dialectic and inductive arguments. This Rogerian argument needs to consist of the following:

- a brief and objectively phrased statement of the issue
- a clear and complete statement of the position you took in your inductive argument
- a clear and complete statement of the position contrary to the one you took in your inductive argument
- a statement of common ground shared by both of the above positions (i.e., what both positions have in common and what values and goals both share)
- a proposal for resolving the argument in a way that recognizes the interests of both positions. (adapted from Hairston, *Contemporary Composition*)

Your paper needs to be 6-8 pages, double-spaced, using MLA documentation format. You are to use 3-5 sources, two of which **must** be from the *Current Issues* text and 1 of which **cannot** be from that text.

Papers will be graded on such measures as argumentation, good integrated use of source materials, general competence in grammar and mechanics, style that fits the demands of the content and audience, and adherence to the MLA format. Aim for about 2-3 citations per page. Your citations must include examples of both summary/paraphrase and direct quotation.

Peer revision of a first draft of this paper is due _____

The final paper is due _____

Although some students initially complain about the requirement of producing three papers on the same topic, they generally agree that the assignment sequence gives them more understanding about not only the topics, but also about the nature of argument and the different approaches one can take to addressing an argument as well. I have found that my students produce much better papers, and have a better understanding of the nature of argumentation, after having written the sequence of three papers discussed here. Colleagues who have adopted this assignment sequence agree with my observations.

According to Harvey Wiener, the predominant metaphor for learning since the Age of Reason presupposed a world of clear answers in which teachers only needed to provide enough information to students to insure that "their mental mirrors reflected reality as completely as possible." Work by theorists such as Kuhn, Vygotsky, Piaget and many others, however, has advanced an alternate concept of knowledge as being "socially justified belief." If we are to prepare our students for a world in which all the answers cannot be found in a book or in the words of a teacher, they must be critical thinkers and problem solvers. Dialectic will help them to develop those skills.

In the words of Tom Petty, who my children assure me is a poet, "We gotta get to a higher place" or "we're going to lose the light." If we don't, as a society, get to a higher place in our critical thinking and problem-solving abilities and bring our students to that place, all other skills we teach them in composition could ultimately be useless.

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